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Encyclical of His Holiness Pope Benedict XV on the Seventh Centenary of the Death of Saint Dominic

Pope Benedict XV

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ENCYCLICAL
of
HIS HOLINESS POPE BENEDICT XV.
on the
SEVENTH CENTENARY
of the
DEATH OF SAINT DOMINIC

Bro. Reginald Smith, O. P.



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THE DOMINICAN FATHERS
SAINT JOSEPH PROVINCE
New York

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In this immortal document, the Holy Father eulogizes the historic achievements of St. Dominic and the Dominican Order for the Faith, emphasizing the solidity of Doctrine, fidelity to the Holy See and devotion to The Blessed Virgin.

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To our Venerable Brethren, the Patriarchs, Primates, Archbishops, Bishops, and Other Local Ordinaries, Having Peace and Communion with the Apostolic See, Benedict XV, Pope.

Venerable Brethren, Health and the Apostolic Blessing:—

The happy day approaches of the seven-hundredth anniversary of the passing of St. Dominic, that light of sanctity, from the miseries of this life to the mansions of the Blessed. We, who have long been one of his most devoted clients, especially from the time we undertook the charge of the church of Bologna which most faithfully guards his ashes, are very glad, therefore, to exhort the faithful from this Apostolic See to honor the memory of that holy man; for thus We not only satisfy our own piety, but perform a duty of gratitude to that Patriarch and lawgiver, as well as his illustrious Order.

ST. DOMINIC AND PREACHING.

As this Saint was entirely a man of God and rightly called Dominic (man of the Lord), so in like manner was he wholly a man of the Church. In him the Church found a most unconquerable champion, and in his Order a wonderful defender of the Holy See. Wherefore, not only did he

strengthen the temple in his days,¹ but also provided for its continual defense in after times, so much so that the words of Honorius III, when approving the Order seem prophetic: "Considering that the brethren of your Order will be defenders of the faith and true lights of the world."

As all are well aware our Lord used no other means to spread His Kingdom than the preaching of the Gospel, that is, the living voice of His heralds who carried His heavenly doctrines to every quarter of the world. "Teach ye all nations,"² He said; "preach the Gospel to every creature."³ Accordingly from the preaching of the Apostles, especially of St. Paul, which was followed by the teaching and instruction of the Fathers and Doctors, it came to pass that the minds of men were illumined with heavenly truth, and their hearts inflamed with the love of all virtues. St. Dominic used this very same method for promoting the salvation of souls when he made this the motto of his Order: "To deliver to others the fruits of contemplation." For this reason he enjoined as a sacred and solemn duty, that his Institute should carefully unite the practice of poverty, innocence and religious discipline with sacred studies and the preaching of the truth.

Now there have been three characteristics of Dominican preaching: great solidity of doctrine, complete loyalty to the Holy See, and particular devotion to the Virgin Mother.

SOLIDITY OF DOCTRINE.

Although St. Dominic, at an early age, felt he was destined to be a preacher, yet he did not undertake that office until after he had made long studies in philosophy and theology at the University of Palencia, and, by constant and extensive reading of the Fathers, had succeeded, under their guidance, in converting, as it were, the riches of Sacred Scripture, in particular of St. Paul, into his own blood and marrow. How much this knowledge of divine things availed him was soon manifested in his controversies with heretics for although these were armed with every art and fallacy against the doctrines of our faith, it is marvelous how powerfully he refuted and

¹ Eccli. 1. 1. ² Matt. xxviii, 19. ³ Mark xvi, 15.

confounded them. This was seen especially at Toulouse, a city which was then considered as the headquarters of the heretics. There all their ablest men were gathered. We learn from history that he and his first companions, powerful in word and work, successfully resisted the pride of the heretics, restrained their ferocity, and so softened their spirits by eloquence and charity that vast numbers of them were brought back to the Church. Nor was divine help wanting to Dominic in this encounter for when he had accepted the challenge of the heretics, that each contender should cast his own book into the flame, it happened miraculously that while the works of the heretics were utterly consumed, that of Dominic remained unharmed. Thus through St. Dominic was Europe saved from the perils of the Albigensian heresy.

The Saint commanded that the members of his Order should be distinguished by this same merit of solid doctrine. Scarcely had his foundation been approved by the Holy See and been honored with the title of "Order of Preachers," when he made it a rule that his houses should be located as near as possible to the most celebrated universities, so that their members might be able to cultivate all the branches of learning, and might attract to the new Order great numbers of persons devoted to higher studies. Therefore the Dominican Order, from its very beginning, was distinctively an Order of learning and at all times its proper work and duty has been to minister to the various diseases caused by error and to shed abroad the light of Christian faith, since there is nothing more prejudicial to eternal salvation than false teachings and ignorance of the truth. It was not strange, then that the power of this new apostolate drew all eyes to itself, based as it was upon the Gospel and the Fathers and recommended by a wealth of knowledge of every sort.

Indeed Divine Wisdom Itself seemed to speak through the Dominicans, since among them were found such illustrious preachers and defenders of Christian wisdom as Hyacinth of Poland, Peter Martyr, and Vincent Ferrer, as well as men who united with surpassing intellectual gifts the highest erudition. Of these latter were Albert the Great, Raymund of Peñafort, and St. Thomas Aquinas, that son of St. Dominic in whom above all God has

deigned to illuminate His Church. Although this Order was always highly esteemed as a teacher of the truth, it obtained an extraordinary glory when the Church declared the teaching of Thomas its own, and when the Popes, having extolled this great Doctor in terms of unusual praise, made him the master and patron of all Catholic schools.

LOYALTY TO HOLY SEE.

With this intense zeal for preserving and defending the faith went hand in hand Dominic's supreme devotion to the Holy See. Thus we learn that, casting himself at the feet of Innocent III, he dedicated his life to the defense of the Roman Pontiff, and that on the following night this same Innocent, our Predecessor, beheld in a dream Dominic courageously offering his shoulders to uphold the mighty weight of the Lateran Basilica which seemed about to fall. From history we also learn that when the Saint had formed his first disciples in Christian perfection, he planned to bring together from the pious and devout laity a certain sacred militia which would at once defend the rights of the Church and strenuously set itself against heretics. This was the origin of the Third Order of Dominicans which, by popularizing among those in the world the way to perfection, was to provide very great adornments and helps for Holy Mother Church.

This loyalty to the Holy See was transmitted by St. Dominic to his sons as a tradition and an inheritance. Whenever, therefore it has happened that peoples and rulers, deluded by error, have attacked the Church, the Dominicans, arising in defense of truth and justice, have shown themselves towards this Apostolic See a most opportune help for preserving the splendor of its authority. Who does not know how glorious in this respect were the deeds of Catherine of Siena, that great virgin of the Dominican Order? Moved by the love of Christ, she struggled against incredible difficulties, and, when the Popes had been absent from Rome for seventy years, she persuaded the Sovereign Pontiff—a thing that no one else had been able to do—to return to his Roman See. Later when the Western Church was torn by a dire schism, St. Catherine kept a great number of the faithful loyal and obedient to the rightful Pontiff.

While passing over other things, we must not neglect to mention that the Dominican Order has given four great Popes to the Church. The last of these St. Pius V, has by his immortal deeds deserved most highly both of Christianity and of civil society. When, after unceasing efforts and urging he had leagued together the Catholic princes, he was able, with the protection and assistance of the Virgin Mother of God,—whom, in consequence, he ordered to be saluted thereafter as “Help of Christians,”—to cast down forever in the Gulf of Lepanto the power of the Turks.

DEVOTION TO THE MOTHER OF GOD.

This event clearly manifests that third quality of Dominican preaching mentioned before, viz., a most fervent devotion towards the great Mother of God. It is said that the victory of Lepanto was revealed to the Pontiff at the very time when throughout the Catholic world the Rosary sodalities were invoking Mary in that form of prayer which St. Dominic had instituted and which his children had propagated far and wide. Loving the Blessed Virgin with filial devotion, Dominic confided especially in her protection when he undertook his task of defending the faith. Among other dogmas denied by the Albigenses were those of the divine maternity and virginity of Mary, which doctrines they pursued with every form of insult. Dominic, therefore, defended to the utmost of his strength these privileges of Mary and called on her for assistance, praying often in the words, “Make me worthy to praise thee, O Holy Virgin; give me power against thy enemies.” How pleased was heaven’s Queen with her pious servant, can easily be gathered from the fact that Dominic became the chosen instrument whom Mary employed to teach the Holy Rosary to her Son’s Spouse, the Church. This form of prayer, at once mental and vocal, in which the chief mysteries of our faith are contemplated, while fifteen Our Fathers and as many decades of the Hail Mary are repeated, is most calculated to arouse and increase in the people piety and every virtue. Rightly then, did Dominic require of his sons that in preaching the Word of God to the faithful they should frequently and carefully inculcate devotion to the Rosary; for of its usefulness

he had had ample experience. On the one hand, he well knew that so great is the power of Mary with her Son that whatever graces He bestows on men come through her administration and apportionment; and on the other hand, that so kind and merciful is she as to be wont to relieve the misery even of those who do not invoke her, while she is unable to refuse those who have recourse to her patronage. Hence the Church has always found Mary to be, especially through the Rosary, that which she is called in the customary salutations, namely, "Mother of grace" and "Mother of mercy." For this reason the Roman Pontiffs have neglected no opportunity down to our own times of highly commending the Rosary of the Blessed Virgin, and have enriched it with apostolic indulgences.

NEED OF THE DOMINICAN ORDER TO-DAY.

Now the Dominican Order, as you yourselves understand, Venerable Brethren, is not less opportune in our times than it was in the day of its Founder. How many there are to-day destitute of the bread of life, that is, of heavenly doctrine, and who waste the appearance of truth and are kept from the faith by sundry errors! That priests may suitably minister to the needs of all these, how necessary is it that they should be zealous for the salvation of their neighbor and be solidly grounded in a knowledge of divine things! Moreover, how many ungrateful and forgetful children of the Church are turned away from the Vicar of Christ either through ignorance or malice, whom it is necessary to bring back to the bosom of their common parent! For remedying these and other evils of all kinds that afflict our age, how much do we need the Motherly patronage of Mary!

The Dominicans have, then, an almost boundless field in which they can labor most usefully for the common welfare. Wherefore it is Our earnest desire that, on the occasion of this centenary celebration, they may renew their spirit after the example of their most holy Founder, and resolve to be every day more worthy of such a Father. In this, as is fitting, the members of the First Order should take the lead. Let them be ever more zealous in so preaching the divine Word that loyalty to the Successor of St. Peter

and devotion to the Blessed Virgin may grow, together with a knowledge and defense of the truth. From the Dominican Tertiaries also the Church expects much good, if, by instructing the ignorant and the unlettered in the precepts of Christian doctrine, they try to conform themselves to the spirit of their Founder. It is our hope and desire that many of them will be constant in this work, since it is a matter of supreme importance to souls. Finally, we wish that all Dominicans will take special interest in promoting among the people the practice of reciting the Rosary. This practice We have already urged upon the faithful when occasion offered, following in this the example of Our Predecessors, especially Leo XIII of happy memory. In these troubled days we most earnestly repeat Our exhortation, which, if it be heeded, we shall regard this centenary celebration as having borne sufficient fruit.

Meanwhile, Beloved Brethren, as a pledge of divine blessings and as a sign of our benevolence, We impart most lovingly in the Lord the Apostolic benediction to you, your clergy and your people.

Given at Rome, at St. Peter's, on the feast of the Princes of the Apostles, June 29, 1921, in the seventh year of Our Pontificate.

BENEDICT XV, Pope.

John I. Smith

